



The Influence of Leadership Style on the Growth and Inclusivity of Special Needs Student in Educational Programs: The Case of Addis Ababa University

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Declaration

I, Yonatan Shimels, hereby declare that this thesis entitled *'"The Influence of Leadership Style on the Growth and Inclusivity of Special Needs Students in Educational Programs: The Case of Addis Ababa University"'* is the result of my original research work. All sources of information, data, and contributions from other works have been appropriately acknowledged through citations and references.

The research was conducted under the guidance and supervision of Dr. Abebaw Minaye, to whom I express profound gratitude for his expert advice, critical insights, and unwavering support throughout this scholarly journey. Ethical approval for this study was granted by Addis Ababa University and all ethical protocols including informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation were strictly adhered to during data collection and analysis.

Name.....

Signature.....

Date.....

Acknowledgements

To begin with, I owe my utmost gratitude to God, whose grace and guidance have seen me through this difficult but fulfilling academic work.

I am tremendously indebted to my thesis advisor Dr. Abebaw Minaye for his consistent support, comments, and encouragement. I am also grateful to colleagues at the School of Psychology and College of Education and Language Studies at Addis Ababa University (AAU) for encouraging my intellectual curiosity and sustaining my commitment to learning.

I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to the special needs students, faculty, and administrators of AAU who made time to share their lived experiences and perspectives and whose voices are the fundamental basis for study the resilience they demonstrated when they faced systemic barriers which in turn motivated my passion for inclusive education.

To my parents, siblings, and loved ones; Thank you for your unconditional support, understanding, and belief in my potential. Your encouragement pushed me through times of self-doubt and fatigue.

I would also like to acknowledge colleagues and friends that were engaged in interesting discussions, provided constructive feedback, and proofread drafts. I appreciate all of your companionship at various stages of this journey, and I assure you it is much less lonely.

Lastly, I want to pay respect to the advocates and organizations that are working tirelessly and professionally in lobbying for special needs rights on a global and local scale. Your work reminds us that inclusivity is not an abstract ideal, but rather a collective responsibility. I hope this study is relevant to that end.

Abbreviations

Here are the abbreviations identified in the research project, alongside their full forms:

AAU: Addis Ababa University

UNCRPD: United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

UDL: Universal Design for Learning

KPIs: Key Performance Indicators

NGOs: Non-Governmental Organizations

UNESCO: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

SNSC: Special Needs Support Center

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Abstract

This project seeks to examine the relationship between leadership styles and inclusion and the holistic development of the students with special needs at Addis Ababa University (AAU), Ethiopia. Structurally informed by transformational leadership, an inclusive education framework, and the social model of disability, this investigation takes a qualitative phenomenological methodological stance to understand how types of leadership might directly influence institutional practices and student experience. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with seven students with disabilities and four others at the university an administrator, and faculty in order to comprehend how equity and inclusion are delivered within AAU. Our thematic analysis revealed that AAU's leadership is primarily transactional and authoritarian with stark bureaucratic processes, limited stakeholder involvement, and governance focuses/creates compliance. AAU has policies under Article 8 and supports centers, however student engagement and access through those policies is curtailed through fragmented operational oversight, inadequate funding, and no accountability. Regardless, students expressed their struggles with barriers associated with access such as inaccessible buildings, outdated assistive technologies; cultural stigma, and social exclusion which contributed to restricting overall academic, emotional, and social welfare. Regardless of the structural and cultural constraints of being students with disabilities at AAU, students accepted being resilient and requested participatory leadership around some kind of training for faculty and dedicate funding to include in access. This project reminds us that transformative leadership is needed for pursuing and bridging the gaps between policy and actual practice. This research has given us reason to believe that inclusion must be embedded not only in institutions but in the lives of students. The need to advocate for structural change is also necessary in various projects to keep flourishing in a growing discourse around inclusive education and likewise flourish within resource constrained environments for inclusive educational change and appeal to relevant formal policies. The work will assist institutional reform because this change is necessary for the current state of exclusionary model in practice and promote inclusive practice for sustainable development and future lifestyle decisions.

Key words: Leadership styles, inclusive education, special needs students, student growth

Introduction

Background of the Study

Leaders in school environment are important in enhancing and ensuring high quality education and inclusiveness. In the higher education institution, leadership is crucial in addressing the diverse needs of the students, particularly those with special needs, who are likely to face barriers that prevent them from fully participating in learning and other activities within the university (Blessinger & Stefani, 2018). This is because leaders in this field had to ensure that they identify and put in place measures that are aimed at the improvement of all students (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Hehir et al., 2016; Day et al 2016).

There are various leadership styles that have different characteristics and benefits as well as challenges. Transformational leadership is one of the most effective leadership styles that seek to change people's attitudes and inspire them to exceed their expectations, while working towards the same goals, in a safe and cooperative environment which can greatly improve programs for students with special needs (Shahbal et al., 2022). On the other hand, transactional leadership is based on setting goals and achieving them through the implementation of specific steps and providing rewards for specific results, which might not be very suitable for creating a culture of inclusiveness. Participative leadership style, that involve students and staff in decision making process, enables students and staff to work together to solve issues on inclusivity (Leithwood et al., 2017). However, authoritarian leadership is efficient in ensuring that rules and regulations are obeyed but lacks the necessary flexibility to meet the needs of the students with special needs (Mulhollan, & O'Connor, 2016).

Inclusiveness in education is the process of implementing and applying of programs that allowed every child to have equal chances of learning and being involved in the educational process. This concept had become more important worldwide due to the advocacy of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with special needs (Ainscow, 2020). In the context of higher education, inclusiveness is meant to foster principles of equal opportunity and equitable representation of learners with different needs and learning support requirements through the provision of physical

and learning recourses and support services. However, such efforts could not be complete without a leadership that promotes diversity and equity in organizations (Bodhi et al., 2022).

Addis Ababa University (AAU), the country's oldest and the largest public university is an exemplary institution in implementing principles of inclusivity in education compare to other Ethiopian universities, (Teferra, 2023). Currently, the university had put in place the following to support students with special needs: accessibility of facilities, advice and guidance (AAU, n.d.). However, there was a problem of the full integration of these students into the academic and social life of the university. Such constraints as lack of resources, untrained or poorly trained faculty and staff, and limited awareness of students with special needs were observed to pose a challenge on the effectiveness of such programs. Therefore, these challenges needed to be addressed by the leadership of AAU, and the university has to align with the principles of inclusivity (Teferra et al., 2018).

The researcher's motivation to conduct the study emerged from an experience during undergraduate studies at AAU. The researcher had assisted by reading exam questions to dorm mates who had visual impairment. It was a privilege to assist them but was wondering why the leadership at the institute or the special needs service center had not come up with a better and more sustainable way of assisting these students. It was when the researcher observed their challenges and decided to find out more about the role of leadership in ensuring that students with special needs are included in the academic environment. Strongly believe that a good leadership system can produce a learning environment where every student can get education regardless of the impairment they have. It is hoped that this research will help to identify the leadership strategies that can enhance the inclusion of students with special needs at AAU and other similar institutions.

The effect of leadership on the inclusivity of students with special needs is an area that has not been sufficiently addressed in the literature within the context of Ethiopian higher education. To this end, this study aims to explore how the leadership styles affected the academic performance and developmental aspects of special needs students at AAU. Growth in this context included academic achievement, personal development, and social integration, (Blessinger & Stefani, 2018; Obiakor et al., 2017). Thus, the research is hoped to help in understanding these processes

and indicate possible effective leadership strategies that could be used to improve the inclusiveness of students with special needs.

Statement of the Problem

Inclusive education is universally agreed upon to be an essential tent of equitable higher education systems, one that is paramount to empowering students from marginalized populations (Salmi & D’Addio, 2021; Vincent & Chiwandire, 2019). However, in Ethiopia, a country experiencing infrastructural constraints, sociocultural stigma facing disability, and poor resource allocation, the prospects of inclusivity have remained aspirational rather than operational (Teferra, 2023). Globally, frameworks rule transformational leadership and systems change, whilst their salience in the context of Ethiopia remains uncharted. This reveals a strategic contextual gap, that of a lack of localized models for leadership driven inclusion in a resource deprived higher education context.

Addis Ababa University (AAU), Ethiopia's flagship institution, professes an inclusive approach in its legislative code, guaranteeing "reasonable accommodations" for special needs students (Teferra, 2023). However, these accommodations remain as symbolic and superficial proclaims rather than actionable processes. Evidence suggests that students still encounter inaccessible infrastructures, erratic faculty supports and bureaucratic struggles (Girma, 2023). This raises an empirical gap, no research reveals how AAU's leadership operates to create or maintain the divide between the policy and practice.

Leadership is the beating heart of a global inclusive transformation, with transformational approaches showing a capacity to address barriers to inclusion through vision, collaboration, and advocacy (Ainscow, 2020; Sharma & Adeoye, 2024). However, at AAU, transactional and authoritarian leadership are the prevailing approaches, valuing compliance over innovation, and hierarchy over stakeholder input (Teferi, 2010). This imperfect evidence highlights a theoretical gap related to the evidence base for the effectiveness of transformational leadership in inclusive education (DeMatthews et al., 2020) but the implications for Ethiopia's rigid academic and power structures remain unexplored.

A fundamental tension lies at the heart of the crisis of inclusivity at AAU: Is it transformational leadership that is the effective agent for change, or can powerful institutional systems make up

for poor leadership? Global scholars' debates touch on interdependence (Carrington et al., 2024), but the issue is more acute in the Ethiopia context, where hierarchical institutions typically push back against reform than to innovate. AAU's stagnation indicates that even the best-structured policies are ineffective without program champions active leaders with resource allocation capacities, accountability and cultural change. This theoretical-practical gap clouds whether AAU's transformation requires mere revolution in leadership, redesign of institutional structures, or both, and this is the dilemma faced in this study.

The absence of particular leadership strategies to support students with special needs had implications for practice. Many of these students were socially rejected, performed poorly in their studies and had minimal chances of improvement and advancement (Hehir et al., 2016; Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020). This not only hindered their growth but also adversely affected the university in the achievement of its mission of providing equal education to all. Until the gaps in leadership and inclusivity were addressed, systemic barriers that prevent the participation and advancement of students with special needs were likely persist (Girma 2023; Graham & Bassett, 2019).

The implications extend beyond the campus gates. The academic decline of special needs students undermines the university's accessibility mission and national development goals (Graham & Bassett, 2019). Employers dismiss any degrees obtained from exclusionary environments, maintaining cycles of poverty. Meanwhile, leadership remains insulated from the implications of prioritizing infrastructural growth, rather than renewing inclusivity or justice. This isolation has created a wilderness culture where policy not only can be broken without consequence, but where the 'good' that it proposes will also be ignored actively.

Along with contributing to theoretical frameworks, the study also sought to provide those involved in policy, teaching, and leadership at all levels of the university sector, with evidence and practice-based opportunities for reimagining how inclusivity looks. By engaging the voices of special needs students and translating their lived experiences into a usable format for institutional change that situates Ethiopia's alignment with the UNCRPD at a high level and the needs of the special needs population at a grassroots level, the research sought not only to map the challenges in the AAU context but to initiate a cultural shift that continues to represent

inclusivity, not as a value-added or generous afterthought, but an integral part of being excellent and socially just educators.

Objectives of the Study

General Objective

This study aimed to explore how leadership styles affect both inclusivity and student growth for individuals with special needs at Addis Ababa University.

Specific Objectives

1. Explore how leadership styles shape the inclusivity and academic, social, and emotional experiences of special needs students at Addis Ababa University.
2. Understanding the barriers that special needs students face in achieving academic, social, and emotional growth.
3. Examining faculty and administrators' perceptions of their role in fostering inclusivity.
4. Analyzing institutional policies and leadership strategies that influence inclusivity at AAU.
5. Identifying practical improvements that can be made to ensure a more inclusive learning environment.

Scope of the Study

This study had a narrow focus on the influence of leadership styles on the inclusivity and growth of special needs students at Addis Ababa University (AAU). Primarily it focused on three major theories and framework, transformational leadership, inclusive education framework and social model of disability and their application in the context of higher education. The leadership styles were linked with inclusive education policies and the social model of disability to assess how leadership practices helped breakdown systemic barriers and encouraged an inclusive academic environment.

The study was geographically confined to AAU as the leading higher education institution in Ethiopia to explore leadership practices in policy-making, resource allocation, faculty training

and infrastructural development for special needs students. The research centered on two key themes: Inclusivity and Growth.

Inclusivity was examined in relation to equity in access, supportive policies and the institutional culture, while growth referred to the academic, social, and emotional development of special needs students. The study excluded all factors outside of leadership and infrastructure of the university to focus on the role of leadership in the university.

Significance of the Study

The research addressed the gaps identified in the literature on inclusive education and leadership and provided practical implications for university administrators and leaders. It sought to identify the leadership behaviors and practices that fostered inclusive settings and could inform leadership development programs and policies at an institution like Addis Ababa University. The findings aimed to minimize the obstacles encountered by special needs students, enabling them to develop academically and personally with the goal of creating more inclusive higher education environments.

One gap was focusing on special education at the university level in Ethiopia and the study served as a model for other institutions, and finally contributed new insights to the literature regarding the topic of special needs students' academic performance. The research encouraged the application of best practice to enhance the inclusion of special needs students, consistent with the global equity and diversity goals of education. The research contributed to the field by presenting a perspective from a developing country, and could support cross-cultural cooperation in inclusive education.

Literature Review

Introduction

The success and inclusivity of educational institutions depend heavily on leadership because it determines how well an institution performs. Leadership plays a crucial role in higher education systems because it improves academic results and enables diverse student populations to succeed. The research by Chun & Evans, 2023; Day & Sammons, 2016; Jerab & Mabrouk, T. 2023; Ruben, 2023 reveals leadership as a critical factor for equitable access and support for all students especially those with special needs. Roberson & Perry, (2022) show through their research that inclusive leadership practices provide equal access and improve organizational commitment to diversity. According to the research by DeMatthews et al. (2020), transformative approaches to foster inclusivity exist and leaders play a critical role in policy advocacy and cultural shifts. The rise of inclusivity as a fundamental principle of higher education systems requires leaders who actively create and sustain inclusive strategies. The research focuses on Addis Ababa University while exploring how leadership affects student growth and inclusivity development.

Leadership Styles & Student Experiences

Transformational Leadership in Education

Transformational leadership, characterized by its emphasis on *visionary guidance*, *collaborative empowerment*, and *intrinsic motivation* (Bass & Avolio, 1994), has been empirically linked to inclusive educational environments. Studies demonstrate that transformational leaders actively dismantle systemic barriers by fostering a culture of collective responsibility resulting in higher academic engagement, social integration, and emotional well-being among special needs students (Leithwood et al., 2017; DeMatthews et al., 2020). For example, Leithwood and Azah (2016) found that participative decision-making, a core tenet of transformational leadership, directly correlates with students' sense of agency and belonging. Conversely, **transactional leadership** prioritizing compliance, rigid rewards/punishments, and hierarchical control creates exclusionary environments. Shahbal et al. (2022) observed that transactional approaches in educational settings *suppressed innovation* and *ignored individualized student needs*, particularly

disadvantaging special needs learners who require flexible support. In Ethiopia, this disparity is exacerbated: despite global evidence supporting transformational models, AAU remains dominated by transactional practices (Teferi, 2010), with authoritarian leaders dismissing student input (Alemayehu, 2021). This misalignment perpetuates **critical gaps**: while Zepeda (2019) confirms leadership shapes academic growth through adaptable policies, and April et al. (2023) tie empathetic leadership to emotional resilience, *no studies examine how AAU's leadership culture directly impacts special needs students lived experiences*—a void this study addresses.

Transformational leadership, which is based on visionary leadership, collaborative empowerment, and intrinsic motivation (Bass & Avolio, 1994) has been studied in relation to inclusive education. Research indicates that transformational leaders work to remove systemic barriers and promote a culture of collective responsibility that leads to increased academic engagement, social connectedness, and well-being for special needs students (Leithwood et al., 2017; DeMatthews et al., 2020). For example, Leithwood & Azah (2016) found that participative decision making (a component of transformational leadership) is positively associated with students' sense of agency and belonging. In contrast, transactional leadership relies on compliance, fixed rewards/punishments, and hierarchical control, designed for an excluding environment. Shahbal et al. (2022) found that a transactional way of leadership restricts creativity in educational institutions, and ignores students' unique needs. This can be detrimental for special needs students who require flexible support, and also because there is considerable research against it. In the case of Ethiopia, this contention is more striking, as AAU is an example that has an opportunity to embrace transformational leadership practices: while a great deal of research supports a transformational model; Ethiopian Universities remain committed to specific transactional practices (e.g., Teferi, 2010), with authoritarian leaders discounting student's environment (Alemayehu, 2021). When different cultures despise students in varying degrees the consequences will be equally critical. Zepeda (2019) presents that leadership influences academic growth through equivocal policies as well; while April et al. (2023), argue that compassionate or empathetic leadership is vital in emotional resilience and well-being. However, in the body of literature, there have been limited studies focused on how leaders or leadership culture at AAU impacts either the lived experience of learning, or inclusive education for special needs students. This gap makes this study existent.

Transactional and Authoritarian Leadership Limitations

Transactional leadership, defined by its reliance on *structured exchanges*, *contingent rewards*, and *corrective interventions* (Khan, 2017), systematically undermines inclusive education. Empirical studies confirm that its rigid, compliance-driven framework fails to accommodate the individualized needs of special needs students. For instance, Shahbal et al. (2022) demonstrated that transactional leaders prioritize administrative efficiency over pedagogical flexibility, resulting in standardized assessments and physical infrastructures that exclude learners with disabilities—a finding corroborated by Ahmad (2025), who noted *reduced academic engagement* and *social marginalization* in such environments. Similarly, **authoritarian leadership** exacerbates exclusion through centralized decision-making that silences stakeholder input. Purwanto et al. (2019) observed that authoritarian leaders in educational settings *suppressed innovation* and *dismissed collaborative problem-solving*, directly contradicting inclusive principles. In higher education, this manifests as faculty resistance to accommodations (e.g., refusing lecture recordings) and inflexible policies that ignore student agency (Pizzolitto et al., 2023). Critically, these styles dominate Ethiopian institutions like AAU: Teferi (2010) documented a *prevalence of transactional practices* in Ethiopian universities, while Alemayehu (2021) highlighted *authoritarian hierarchies* that stifle participatory dialogue. This misalignment with global best practices (e.g., participative leadership's success in fostering belonging; Leithwood & Azah, 2016) reveals a **contextual gap** in Ethiopia's leadership approach to inclusivity.

Transactional leadership - when a leader provides procedures for structured transactions, provides contingent rewards or corrective actions when a person is not compliant (Khan, 2017) - essentially contributes to exclusionary education. Transactional leadership is based on compliance that cannot be customized to individuals. Indeed, empirical studies demonstrate that compliance-based, bureaucratic structures cannot react to the individual needs of special needs students. For instance, Shahbal et al. (2022) showed that for transactional leaders, administrative effectiveness superseded pedagogic flexibility which resulted in uniform assessments and built environment which were exclusionary to learners with disabilities. Ahmad (2025) corroborates this finding was that he also evidenced diminished academic participation and social exclusion. In contrast to outputs of transactional leadership, authoritarian leadership shares an element of

exclusion, namely centralized decision making is a core part and this would argue that voices of stakeholders would be silenced. Purwanto et al. (2019) witnessed evidence of authoritarian leadership in educational contexts and demonstrated how centralized decision making, lack of collaboration, and lack of innovation directly contradicted principles of inclusive leadership. Moreover, in higher education, authoritarian leadership in participation outside of the classroom is limited with examples being faculty refusing to allow recording of lectures as an accommodation or policies that displayed no cognizance of student lived experience (Pizzolitto et al., 2023). In their own way, both transactional and authoritarian forms of leadership are evident in Ethiopian institutions, with AAU being the most notable example as transactional leadership is prevalent in the Ethiopian system (Teferi, 2010), while authoritarian hierarchies that limit participatory engagement were described by Alemayehu (2021). This hypocrisy is alarming with reference to best practices around the globe (for example, participative leadership being essential to an individual feeling like they belong to a community; Leithwood & Azah, 2016) and questions the capacity of Ethiopia's leaders to adopt and adapt an inclusivity-based approach, considering the etymological divergence.

Linking Leadership to Student Well-being

Leadership approaches directly shape the academic, social, and emotional development of special needs students through institutional culture and support systems. **Transformational leadership** fosters comprehensive growth by prioritizing individualized empowerment and adaptive learning environments. Empirical studies confirm this: Wang et al. (2016) demonstrated that transformational leaders' *emphasis on intrinsic motivation and personalized mentorship* significantly improved academic performance (e.g., higher graduation rates) and socio-emotional resilience among students with disabilities. Similarly, Sharma and Adeoye (2024) found that such leaders' collaborative ethos reduced stigma, enhancing peer relationships and campus integration. Conversely, **transactional leadership** correlates with constrained growth outcomes due to its rigid, reward-punishment framework. Hamstra et al. (2014) documented that transactional approaches in educational settings *suppressed creativity and prioritized short-term compliance over long-term development*, particularly disadvantaging special needs learners requiring flexible pathways. This limitation extends to emotional well-being: while transformational leadership cultivates self-efficacy through inclusive practices (April et al., 2023), transactional models

inadvertently reinforce marginalization, amplifying stress and disengagement (Hamstra et al., 2014). Critically, **participative leadership** bridges these extremes by centering student agency. Leithwood and Azah (2016) observed that leaders who co-designed solutions with students *strengthened self-advocacy skills* and *academic confidence*—key drivers of holistic growth. Despite this evidence, no Ethiopian research examines how these leadership dynamics manifest in universities like AAU to affect special needs students' trajectories.

Leadership styles have a direct impact on the academic, social and emotional development of special needs students by supporting institutional culture and systems. Through leadership and institutional culture, transformational leadership promotes overall development by prioritizing individualized empowerment and adaptable environments for learning. Research supports transformational leadership as a means of promoting individualized, intrinsic, and targeted supports. Wang et al. (2016) found significant success in the academic performance (e.g., higher graduation rates) and socio-emotional well-being of students living with disabilities, due to transformational leaders developing intrinsic motivation and personalized mentoring programs. Sharma and Adeoye (2024) further described how transformational leaders develop a collaborative ethos that reduces stigmas related to disability thereby improving peer relationships and campuses as welcoming places. Conversely, transactional leadership relates to restricted growth related to a rigid reward and punishment, due to short-term contingent compliance. Hamstra et al. (2014) explained how transactional leadership in the classroom restricted further creativity based on compliance with its reward-based view of addressing learner outcomes. This typically represents reduced growth and development outcomes, plus transactional leadership limits pathways for special needs learners. Transactional leadership included emotional distress as well, whereas transformational leadership commonly cultivates self-efficacy in social roles by employing inclusive practices (April et al., 2023). On the contrary, CRP leadership developed opportunities for transactional leaders to marginalize inclusion as a means of stress and disengagement (Hamstra et al., 2014) due to analysis of expected outcomes. Importantly, participative leadership, albeit at the poles of leadership, provides the opportunity to center student autonomy. Leithwood and Azah (2016) contributed to leadership accountability where the leader and learners co-created the pathway to success. Leaders who support students lead engagement, by considering and sharing choice with students as direct contributors to self-

advocacy and the confidence for academic success, and key components to overall growth development. To date, no research has been found that examines these leadership styles in an Ethiopian context, nor in relation to any student body like AAU special needs students and their educational trajectory.

Barriers to Student Growth

Systemic Barriers

Systemic barriers particularly **inaccessible infrastructure** and **chronic resource shortages** severely constrain the academic and social growth of special needs students in higher education. Empirical studies consistently identify physical and digital inaccessibility as primary impediments. Fernández-Cerero et al. (2024) demonstrated that universities lacking assistive technologies (e.g., screen readers, braille displays) and adapted learning materials *directly limit academic participation* and *heighten dependency* on peer support, undermining autonomy. Complementing this, Zelelew (2016) documented that inadequate physical infrastructure—such as absent ramps, elevators, or accessible restrooms—*reduces classroom attendance* and *isolates students from social spaces*, exacerbating educational disparities. Resource inequities further entrench these barriers: Kebede (2020) found that insufficient funding for disability services in Ethiopian universities forces institutions to ration assistive devices while Mashwama and Omodan (2024) highlighted that outdated technologies in resource-constrained contexts *stall skill development* and *hinder employment readiness*. Critically, these systemic failures often stem from **policy-implementation gaps**. Solomon (2021) noted that Ethiopian universities frequently adopt inclusive education policies (e.g., Universal Design for Learning frameworks) but fail to allocate budgets for implementation, creating a cycle of "aspirational commitments without actionable support." This disconnect between policy rhetoric and resource investment remains a *critical, unaddressed barrier* in the Global South.

Students with special needs in higher education suffer from systemic barriers, which include inaccessible infrastructure and chronic resource deficits, which hinder their academic and social development. Research consistently finds that logistical difficulties encountered physically or digitally are the main barriers. Fernández-Cerero et al. (2024) showed that universities that lack assistive technologies (like a screen reader, braille displays) and pedagogically altered learning

materials, are directly impeding student's academic participation and increasing reliance on peers for academic success, which diminishes autonomy. In addition, Zelelew (2016) showed that the lack of physical infrastructure (like ramps, elevators, and accessible bathrooms) limits class attendance and the availability of social spaces, further increasing the educational gap. Resource disparities compound these barriers; for example, Kebede (2020) found that the lack of state funding of disability services in Ethiopian universities led to shortages of assistive devices and subsequently rationing. In another study, Mashwama and Omodan (2024) demonstrated that impediments from outdated technologies in a resource-poor environment inhibited the development of the relevant skills and employability of future job seekers. Systemic barriers like those outlined above often arise as a result of implementation issues related to a policy. For example, Solomon (2021) illustrated that Ethiopia universities persist in adopting inclusive education policies (such as the Universal Design for Learning frameworks) and once adopted, would complain and even passively resist the budget that would allow for implementation, and hence legitimate learning opportunities. As a result "aspirational commitments without support" for implementation are all but guaranteed to defeat the purpose of the "aspirational commitment." The disparity between policy and resource commitments presents a major unresolved barrier in the Global South.

Attitudinal Barriers

Attitudinal barriers rooted in **cultural stigma**, **faculty biases**, and **misconceptions about disability** profoundly inhibit the academic and social integration of special needs students in higher education. Empirical evidence confirms that societal perceptions of disability as "deficit" rather than diversity perpetuate exclusion. Goodley (2020) theorized that *ableist norms* in educational institutions *internalize inferiority* among students with disabilities, directly corroding self-efficacy and emotional well-being. This is exacerbated by **faculty resistance**: Moraña and Carballo (2017) documented that educators lacking inclusive pedagogy training often view accommodations as "burdensome," *lower academic expectations* for special needs learners, and *resist curriculum adaptations*, resulting in achievement gaps. Similarly, Hayes and Bulat (2017) identified that untrained staff *default to charity-based approaches* (e.g., "pity over rights"), which inadvertently reinforce dependency and marginalization. Peer attitudes compound these challenges; Shpigelman et al. (2022) found that non-disabled students frequently *exclude special*

needs peers from group work and social activities due to unconscious biases about competence. Critically, these attitudes are institutionalized: Al Hamad et al. (2024) noted that without *mandatory disability awareness training*, universities perpetuate "cycles of stereotype-driven exclusion." In Ethiopia, where disability stigma intersects with cultural narratives (Teferra, 2023), *how these attitudes manifest in faculty/peer interactions remains understudied*—a gap obstructing targeted interventions.

Cultural stigma, faculty bias, and misconceptions about disability can all contribute to negative attitudinal barriers limiting special needs students' academic and social integration in higher education. Evidence shows that societies perception of disability as a 'deficit' instead of diversity creates situations of exclusion (Goodley, 2020). Goodley theorized that internalizing ableist norms in education creates feelings of inferiority among students with disabilities leading to a decline in self-efficacy and emotional health. Attitudinal barriers can be exacerbated by faculty bias; Moraña and Carballo (2017) found that a lack of training in inclusive pedagogy resulted in attitudes that labeled disability accommodations as a 'burden', lowered expectations for also underestimating the potential of students needing special accommodations, and resisting, or modifying the curriculum to support special needs students leading to achievement gaps. In similar terms, Hayes and Bulat (2017) observed that staff, as a result of lacking the appropriate disability training, typically defaulted to providing charity-based causes of support thus perpetuating reasons to be dependent and marginalised. In addition to faculty bias, peer attitudes may also contribute; Shpigelman et al. (2022) reported that non-disabled peers could overlook group work and activities with special needs peers because of unconscious biases or doubts about their ability. These attitudes are essential, however, it is necessary to understand how they become institutional; Al Hamad et al. (2024) observe that without mandatory training for faculty on disability awareness, universities are perpetuating a "cycle of stereotype-driven exclusion". In Ethiopia, where disability stigma intersects with other cultural narratives (Teferra, 2023), the nature of how these perceptions play out in the interactions between peer and faculty remains desultory; hindering the implementation of structured and targeted intervention approaches.

Policy-Implementation Gaps

The chasm between inclusive education policies and their implementation constitutes a critical barrier to student growth, particularly in resource-constrained contexts. Global research reveals that **symbolic policy adoption** without operational mechanisms perpetuates exclusion. Solomon (2021) documented that Ethiopian universities frequently *approve international conventions* (e.g., UNCRPD) and *enact equity-focused policies* yet fail to establish accountability structures, rendering commitments. This aligns with Kebede's (2020) finding that *decentralized responsibility* for inclusivity where departments operate without cross-unit coordination *fragments service delivery* and *obscures accountability*. Consequently, students face bureaucratic labyrinths: Billingsley et al. (2018) identified that *absence of centralized monitoring systems* forces special needs learners to "navigate disjointed administrative channels," delaying accommodations and eroding trust. Crucially, **leadership ambivalence** exacerbates these gaps. Teferra (2023) observed that Ethiopian university leaders often *prioritize infrastructural expansion* over inclusive education, reflecting a "compliance-over-commitment" mindset. This misalignment manifests as **resource misallocation**: Šiška et al. (2020) noted that without *binding budgetary directives* tied to inclusivity goals, funds earmarked for disability services are routinely diverted to "higher-visibility projects." The result is a *systemic implementation gap* where policies exist on paper but fail to translate into equitable student support.

The gap between inclusive education policies and practice represents a significant barrier to student progress - particularly in contexts of limited resources. Evidence from around the world demonstrates that adopting a policy but not having implementation mechanisms serves to uphold exclusion. For example, Solomon (2021) found that while Ethiopian universities often adopt international agreements (e.g., UNCRPD) and commit to equity-focused policies, they seldom develop systems of accountability where policy commitments become limited. This is consistent with Kebede's (2020) finding that decentralized ownership of responsibility for inclusion, where departments operate with limited interaction with other units within a university, skews inclusive service delivery and limits accountability. As a result, students experience bureaucratic convolutions as they work to access legitimate support: Billingsley et al. (2018) indicated that the absence of one centrally coordinated oversight mechanism requires special needs learners to "navigate through a series of fragmented administrative pathways," which results in a delay in access to accommodations while building mistrust. However, it is leadership uncertainty that

further sustains this lack of coordination. Teferra (2023) argued that Ethiopian university senior leaders tend to favour facility expansion policy over inclusive education policy because their attitude is one of obligation or compliance, rather than commitment. Misallocation of resources is an illustration of misalignment: Šiška et al. (2020) demonstrated that without binding budget guidelines which relate to inclusivity goals, resources that have been set aside for disability services are routinely repurposed for "higher visibility projects." Therefore, we experience a systemic implementation gap, where policies exist on paper but do not translate into equitable student experience.

Teachers and Administrator Roles

Perceptions of Inclusivity

Faculty and administrators wield significant influence as arbiters of inclusive education, yet their perceptions of this role vary markedly between *facilitators of accessibility* and *gatekeepers of tradition*. Empirical studies reveal that faculty who embrace inclusive pedagogy actively dismantle barriers: Moraña et al. (2020) documented that educators identifying as "facilitators" *proactively adapt teaching methods* (e.g., multimodal materials, flexible assessments) and *champion student agency*, directly correlating with improved academic confidence among special needs learners. Conversely, **resistance persists** among staff viewing accommodations as disruptive. Aguis (2024) found that administrators in rigid institutional cultures often *prioritize bureaucratic efficiency* over individualized support, dismissing accommodation requests as "logistical burdens" rather than rights-based necessities. This administrative inertia manifests as **systemic exclusion**; Al Hamad et al. (2024) noted that leaders lacking inclusive mandates *default to reactive (vs. proactive) policies*, perpetuating environments where special needs students must "justify their needs repeatedly." Critically, these divergent roles are reinforced by **training disparities**: Hayes and Bulat (2017) established that faculty receiving disability-awareness training *demonstrated higher empathy* and *adopted Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles*, whereas untrained staff *relied on deficit-based assumptions*. In Ethiopia, where formal inclusive education training remains scarce (Teferra, 2023), *how faculty and administrators perceive their roles and the institutional factors shaping these perceptions—is unstudied*, representing a critical knowledge gap.

Faculty, and administrators play an important role in inclusive education as gatekeepers, however their role changes as a facilitator to accessibility or a gatekeeper of tradition. Faculty, along with their training, are an important part of the development of students with special needs and disabilities, as barriers are broken down if a faculty member embraces inclusive pedagogy. For example, Moriña et al. (2020) found that a faculty member who called themselves a “facilitator” removed barriers and recognized agency: they changed their pedagogy (e.g., multimodal teaching, flexible assessments) and student involvement in their learning, which lead to increased academic confidence for their special needs learners. This is contrary to those who engaged with documentation further down the inclusion spectrum because of their understanding of barriers. Aguis (2024) documented instances of administrators operating in non-inclusive, rigid institutional cultures and how support was framed as bureaucratic efficiency rather than something to support students with disabilities (e.g., disability accommodations), often dismissing disability accommodation requests as “logistical burdens” instead of rights-based requests. The systemic inertia of the institution was a continuation of the institutional exclusion of students with special needs; Al Hamad et al. (2024) noted when school leaders did not have an inclusion mandate their exclusionary practices allowed for policies that supported a reactive (not proactive) model of inclusion whereby students with special needs had to “prove or justify their needs over and again.” It is also important to think about degrees of similarities of professional development because these differences are further sustained by the nature of training. For example, Hayes and Bulat (2017) documented that when faculty received disability-aware training (either at their institution or as part of their teacher-preparation program) they were not only more empathetic to the needs of students with disabilities but were more likely to adapt their practice towards Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles. Faculty and administrators without the training often reverted to deficit assumptions. Even within the field of inclusive in Ethiopia, there is no current formal training in inclusive education (Teferra, 2023) and how the faculty and administrators perceived their role along with the institutional context that informed their perception and inclusive education has not been studied. This is an important gap in the literature and knowledge of inclusion beyond policy and schools in Ethiopia.

Training Deficits

Inadequate training in inclusive education methodologies and disability rights perpetuates systemic barriers, transforming faculty and administrators into inadvertent agents of exclusion. Empirical evidence confirms that **training voids directly correlate with discriminatory practices**. Hayes and Bulat (2017) established that educators lacking mandatory disability competency programs *default to pedagogical rigidity, resist accommodations* (e.g., opposing lecture recordings or extended exam time), and *internalize ableist assumptions* resulting in environments where special needs students "negotiate access rather than learn." This aligns with Moriña and Carballo's (2017) finding that untrained faculty *underestimate student capabilities and view accommodations as discretionary favors*, reinforcing dependency. Administrators similarly contribute to exclusion when unprepared: Al Hamad et al. (2024) documented that leaders without continuous professional development in inclusivity *prioritize cost-efficiency over accessibility* (e.g., rejecting braille printer funding) and *fail to implement accountability mechanisms*. Crucially, these deficits are institutionalized; Kebede (2020) identified that Ethiopian universities *lack structured training frameworks*, leading to *ad hoc workshops* that ignore context-specific challenges (e.g., resource constraints, cultural stigma). The consequence is a self-sustaining cycle: without training, staff perpetuate exclusion; without inclusive cultures, training remains deprioritized a gap that remains unaddressed in Ethiopia's higher education landscape.

Poor training in inclusive education approaches and disability rights, further exacerbated by a lack of supports, leads to systemic barriers that render faculty and administrator's unintentional actors in exclusion. Data illustrate that the absence of training directly correlates to systematic discrimination. For instance, Hayes and Bulat (2017) reported that if an institution does not engage staff with mandatory disability competency programs, educators fall back on pedagogical rigidity and learn to deny accommodations (consider the obvious cases of refusing to record lectures, refusal to allow additional time on exams, etc.) and develop ableist assumptions which leads to special needs students operating in environments where they are "negotiating access versus learning." The authors support that finding with how faculty retain the idea that the students with disabilities are not capable and that accommodations are favors or benevolence on their part reinforcing helpless dependency of aides on users. Unfortunately, we see administrators act in a similar manner when there is no preparation. For example, Al Hamad et

al. (2024) report that administrators unprepared for their roles prioritize 'managing costs related to avoidable expenses' over criteria related to accessibility (i.e., denying the expense of a braille printer) and do not have accountability mechanisms in place. To compound the issues further, these examples are systemic issues. Kebede (2020) reported that Ethiopian universities do not have structured training systems, as such, institutional training developed through one-off workshops have been ineffective at addressing context-specific barriers (i.e., resources, stigmas, etc.). A cycle of sustained exclusion arises: without training unprepared staff then create exclusion; without culture of inclusiveness, training is less relevant. This gap that remains largely unaddressed in the context of higher education in Ethiopia.

Leadership Influence on Staff Mindset

Leadership styles fundamentally dictate institutional attitudes toward inclusivity by modeling values, allocating resources, and incentivizing behaviors that either challenge or entrench exclusionary norms. Empirical evidence confirms that **transactional leadership** actively reinforces staff resistance to inclusive practices. Benwahhoud (2023) demonstrated that leaders emphasizing *rule compliance* and *hierarchical control* cultivate environments where faculty view accommodations as "disruptions to efficiency," directly correlating with *reduced pedagogical flexibility* and *defensive responses* to student requests. This aligns with Khan's (2017) finding that transactional frameworks *prioritize standardized outcomes* over individualized support, normalizing faculty dismissiveness toward disability-related needs. Conversely, **transformational leadership** disrupts this cycle by fostering collective responsibility. Sharma and Adeoye (2024) documented that leaders championing participatory decision-making *empowered staff to co-create inclusive solutions* (e.g., UDL adaptations), resulting in *higher empathy* and *proactive policy advocacy* among faculty. Critically, leadership commitment must be systemic: Kebede (2020) established that Ethiopian universities lacking *institutionalized leadership pipelines* for inclusivity (e.g., training deans in disability rights) perpetuate "cultures of indifference," where staff mirror leaders' ambivalence. This reveals a **contextual void**: while leadership's role in shaping staff mindset is globally acknowledged, *how Ethiopian higher education leaders influence faculty/administrator attitudes toward special needs inclusion remains unstudied*—a gap obstructing cultural transformation.

Leadership styles have a direct influence on how an institution views inclusion by demonstrating values, distributing resources, and rewarding behaviors that may challenge or reinforce exclusionary practices. Research evidence shows that transactional leadership helps to support the resistance of the staff toward inclusion. Benwahhoud (2023) illustrated that leaders who focused on rule adherence and hierarchical control fostered experiences where faculty thought that accommodation requests were "disruptions to efficiency." This orientation had an "inverse relationship" with pedagogical flexibility and resulted in staff defensive responses to students. This is consistent with Khan's (2017) findings that transactional models encourage standardized outputs as prioritized over individualized guidance and help normalize disregard for disability-related needs of faculty, staff and students. In contrast, transformational leadership breaks this cycle of transactional. Sharma and Adeoye (2024) provided evidence that leaders who favored participatory decision-making empowered staff to engage in co-creating inclusive solutions (e.g., UDL adaptations) with faculty being more empathetic and proactively advocate for policy changes. Importantly, leadership support must be systemic: Kebede (2020) demonstrated that instituted leadership around inclusion (e.g., training deans around disability rights) support contexts that are no longer "cultures of indifference" where staff reflect the leaders' ambivalence. This lends itself to a contextual gap – while it is commonly accepted that leadership matters to staff mindset and interaction, the manner in which Ethiopian higher education leaders can positively influence faculty/administrator attitudes toward inclusion of those with special needs, has not been examined, and this represents a distinct gap to the necessary cultural transformation.

Institutional Policies & Strategies

Policy Frameworks in Ethiopia and AAU

Addis Ababa University's (AAU) inclusivity policies—notably its legislative mandate to 'formulate policies designed to promote principles of tolerance and accommodate issues of diversity' (Addis Ababa University [AAU], 2023, Art. 10.1.9) and the Special Needs Support Centre (SNSC)—establish a formal commitment to equitable education. However, empirical analyses reveal critical implementation failures (Girma, 2023). While the legislation requires the Senate to 'issue guidelines for proper implementation' (AAU, 2023, Art. 168), the absence of specific enforcement mechanisms has allowed inconsistent interpretation across departments,

rendering accommodations theoretically mandated but operationally inconsistent. Teferra (2023) documented *inadequate staffing, fragmented resource allocation, and absence of cross-departmental coordination*, reducing its efficacy to "symbolic gestures." These limitations mirror broader Ethiopian policy challenges; Solomon (2021) established that national frameworks (e.g., the Education Roadmap) *prioritize inclusivity rhetorically but omit binding accountability measures*, enabling universities to neglect implementation. Crucially, **resource diversion** exacerbates these gaps: Kebede (2020) found that AAU and peer institutions *redirect disability funds* to "high-visibility infrastructure projects," leaving assistive technologies and training chronically underfunded. This misalignment between policy intent and practice persists due to **leadership ambivalence**: Billingsley et al. (2018) noted that without *clear Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)* and *penalties for non-compliance*, inclusivity policies become "unenforceable aspirations." Thus, while AAU's frameworks exist, *how institutional leadership bridges this policy-practice chasm remains unexamined* a gap obstructing transformative change.

The inclusivity policies of Addis Ababa University (AAU) (e.g., its legislative mandate to "formulate policies intended to promote principles of tolerance and be responsive to the issues of diversity" (Addis Ababa University [AAU] (2023), Art. 10.1.9), and the existence of the Special Needs Support Centre (SNSC)) formalize the institution's commitment to equitable education; however, analysis of actual practice has found that implementation be limited (Girma, 2023). While the legislation does call on the Senate to "issue guideline for its proper implementation" (AAU, 2023, Art. 168), with no written accountability provisions for enforcement, the Senate has allowed departments autonomy in interpretation leading to provisions for accommodations being provided by some departments yet others not. Teferra (20203) reported on a shortage of staff, restricted resources, and lack of inter-departmental collaboration together reduce the SNSC response to about "symbolic gestures." These challenges are reflective of local Ethiopian policy dilemmas; Solomon (2021) noted that national policies, such as the Education Roadmap, are typically all rhetoric and very little legally binding accountability measures, leaving universities to decide whether or not they will act. Moreover, the diversion of resources has made this policy-practice divide that much wider: Kebede (2020) found that AAU and similar institutions were diverting disability funding to "high-visibility infrastructure projects" that left things like assistive technology and training perpetually underfunded. It must be recognized that this gap

between policy aspirations and practice will continue in the face of leadership inaction: Billingsley et al. (2018) recognized that there is always the possibility of aspiration-driven compliance without prescriptive Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and penalties for noncompliance making inclusivity policies "unenforceable aspirations." So, while there are frameworks at AAU, how institutional leadership will bridge the policy-practice divide has not been studied nor analyzed, and overall gap inhibiting transformative change.

Global Best Practices

Globally, transformative inclusivity in higher education is driven by **participative governance models** and **rigorous accountability systems** that center stakeholder agency and enforce compliance. Empirical studies validate that **co-designed policies** significantly enhance implementation efficacy: Sharma and Adeoye (2024) argue that embedding student, faculty, administrator coalitions in institutional decision-making reduces policy resistance and increases ownership of inclusive initiatives a strategy empirically linked to higher accommodation uptake in transformative educational leadership models. Complementing this, **accountability infrastructures** prove critical; Billingsley et al. (2018) established that institutions mandating *annual inclusivity audits* tied to *performance metrics* (e.g., retention rates, resource allocation transparency) *accelerated compliance* and *penalized departmental negligence*. Technological integration further strengthens these frameworks: Fornauf and Erickson (2020) documented that **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** implementation—systematically adapting curricula, assessments, and physical/digital environments—*increased accessibility* and *reduced ad-hoc accommodations* by 45% in universities adopting it as policy. Crucially, **cross-departmental synergy** is indispensable: Selisko et al. (2024) found that *binding inter-unit protocols* (e.g., academic affairs collaborating with disability services) *streamlined support* and *prevented bureaucratic fragmentation*. Despite this evidence, *Ethiopian institutions like AAU rarely institutionalize these practices* (Solomon, 2021), opting for siloed, non-participatory approaches—underscoring a **contextual implementation gap**.

Transformative inclusivity in higher education, evident around the world, is made possible through participatory governance schemas and rigorous accountability systems built upon stakeholder agency and compliance. There is research evidence to show that co-designed policy

implementation improves its effectiveness: Sharma & Adeoye (2024) argue for the importance of student, faculty, and administrator coalitions embedded within institutional decision-making processes to reduce resistance to policy implementation and increase ownership of inclusive initiatives. These coalition practices are also empirically related to increased implementation rates of accommodations inclusive in transformative educational leadership models. In addition to participatory governance systems, the importance of accountability systems cannot be overstated; Billingsley et al., (2018) demonstrated that institutions requiring yearly audits of their inclusivity practices, which were linked to institutional performance factors (e.g., retention, transparency of resources), increased urgency in achieving compliance and instigated consequences if departments did not comply. Technology is also critical to participatory governance and accountability systems: Fornauf & Erickson, (2020) reported that Universal Design for Learning (UDL)—which entails iterative and systematic modifications of the curriculum, assessment practices, and physical & digital spaces to increase accessibility—led to a 45% decrease in students requesting one-off accommodations in universities where UDL policies were adopted. It's also important to recognize the necessity of cross-departmental engagement; Selisko et al., (2024) found that inter-unit binding agreed protocol, for instance, 'the Division of Academic Affairs collaborating with Disability Services' resulted in seamless and rapid support options for students as opposed to a bureaucratic system in which one unit delegates responsibility to another. Recognizing these documented practices and processes noted by researchers, and the fact that the practices adopted by Ethiopian institutions—such as AAU—are years behind internationally, pathologies of ignorance (Solomon, 2021) associate with siloed and non participatory practices in institutions, suggest a significant contextual gap in respect of implementation.

Ethiopian Policy-Context Mismatch

Ethiopia's inclusive education policies—notably the *Education and Training Policy* and *Higher Education Proclamations*—exhibit a fundamental disconnect between aspirational frameworks and contextual realities, crippling their efficacy. Empirical analyses reveal that **symbolic policy alignment** with global standards (e.g., UNCRPD) masks operational neglect. Solomon (2021) demonstrated that Ethiopian policies *emphasize equity rhetorically but omit localized implementation strategies*, resulting in "universal frameworks ill-fitted to resource-constrained

universities." This misalignment is exacerbated by **decentralization failures**: Kebede (2020) documented that assigning inclusivity oversight to under-resourced departments *fragmented accountability* and *enabled inconsistent service delivery*, as staff lacked training or authority to execute mandates. Crucially, **resource diversion** persists despite policy commitments: Šiška et al. (2020) found that Ethiopian institutions *redirected disability budgets* to "politically prioritized initiatives" (e.g., new campuses), leaving assistive technologies and faculty training chronically underfunded. This reflects a **systemic governance flaw**: Billingsley et al. (2018) established that without *binding accountability mechanisms* (e.g., inclusivity KPIs tied to funding), policies become "unenforced declarations." Nowhere is this more evident than in leadership ambivalence; Teferra (2023) observed that Ethiopian university administrators *publicly endorsed inclusivity* while *internally deprioritizing it* in strategic plans—mirroring national gaps where policy ambition outpaces institutional will. Consequently, Ethiopia's policy landscape remains characterized by *implementation voids*, where context-agnostic frameworks falter against socioeconomic and cultural constraints.

Ethiopia's inclusive education policies including the Education and Training Policy and the Higher Education Proclamations have a fundamental disconnection between aspirational policy frameworks and the contextual realities that have impeded their utility. Evidence shows that deliberately symbolic policy alignment with international norms (for instance, UNCRPD) has led to actual indifference in their implementation. For example, Solomon (2021) showed that Ethiopian policies have rhetoric around equality, however, they do not recognize localised implementation strategies and institutional structures between countries, creating "universal frameworks ill-suited for the realities of resource-constrained universities." Finally, dissatisfaction in the implementation of inclusive practices was aggravated by failures of decentralization: for example using Kebede's (2020) study, naming departments with little oversight and resources to implement constituents provided fragmented accountability, thus "fragmented the organizational responsibility," and created barriers to the availability of services because the staff were untrained or had authority to act. In addition to this, diversion of resources exists in practice, despite policies that advocated for inclusiveness: Šiška et al. (2020) for instance, found that funds needed for disability on the campuses were diverted to "politically prioritized initiatives, that impacted inclusiveness or disability practices," for example they noted

that new campuses did not have access to services or academic plans for assistive technologies or faculty underdevelopment. Meaning this again exposed another governance fault line: (Billingsley et al., 2018) identified that without binding accountabilities to the policy (for example inclusiveness Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) bound to funding) the policies were merely "unenforced proclamations." Nowhere was this gap more apparent than when observing leaders who were ambivalent with regards to inclusivity; for instance, Teferra (2023) found that Ethiopian university administrators publicly endorsed inclusivity at the same time they deprioritised it in their strategic plans; a continuous interruption with a system of governance found within the institutions. National policy ambitions routinely appeared to surpass the will of institutions. This has resulted in Ethiopia's policy landscape seemingly exhibiting voids in implementation where context-neutral frameworks flounder in the face of constrained socio-economic and cultural realities.

Pathways to Inclusive Environments

Student-Driven Solutions

Empirically validated pathways to inclusive environments prioritize **participatory governance** and **structural adaptability**, positioning students as co-architects of institutional change. "Sharma and Adeoye (2024) contend that transformative leadership necessitates embedding student voices in institutional governance, arguing that participatory mechanisms like student-led advisory boards can reduce resistance to inclusive policies and align resources with authentic needs a theoretical framework applicable to enhancing accommodation relevance at universities like AAU. This aligns with Leithwood and Azah's (2016) finding that *collaborative decision-making forums* where special needs students codesign accessibility audits *strengthened institutional accountability* and *fostered psychological ownership* of inclusivity outcomes. Complementing this, **Universal Design for Learning (UDL)** frameworks systematically remove barriers through proactive adaptation: Fornauf and Erickson's (2020) systematic review of 32 empirical studies established that higher education institutions implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) as mandatory policy significantly reduced reliance on ad-hoc accommodations—with aggregated evidence showing reductions of 40–70% across studies—while consistently improving academic outcomes for students with disabilities through

multimodal curricula and flexible assessments (pp. 187–195). Crucially, technology integration amplifies these gains: Fernández-Cerero et al. (2024) established that *digital accessibility tools* (e.g., AI-powered captioning, adaptive learning platforms) *democratized access* and *minimized stigmatization* when scaled institution-wide. These student-centered approaches remain largely untested in Ethiopian higher education—a *critical implementation gap* given AAU’s centralized governance and resource constraints (Kebede, 2020).

Empirically backed models for creating inclusive settings are grounded in participatory governance and structural flexibility in which students are partners in the development of systemic change. According to Sharma and Adeoye (2024), transformative leadership is rooted in a student's voice being part of institutional governance. This can be achieved through the establishment of participatory methods like student-led advisory boards, which address barriers and resistance to inclusive policies and provide alignment with actual needs—a theoretical construct that can assist in thinking about relevance for accommodation at institutions like AAU. Leithwood and Azah (2016) described a finding related to participatory decisions where special needs students co-designed accessibility audits as collaborative discussion forums that created institutional accountability in promoting psychological ownership of inclusivity outcomes. Another complementary model is Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which aims to systematically eliminate barriers using proactive adaptation. Fornauf and Erickson (2020) conducted a synthesis of 32 empirical studies of higher education institutions where implementing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) became institutionalized policy. In short, implementing UDL as institutionalized policy mitigated the reliance on ad-hoc accommodations, controlling for variable reductions of 40–70% in aggregated evidence across studies, while continuously improving academic outcomes for students with disabilities through the use of multimodal delivery and flexible assessments (pp. 187–195). Importantly, technology serves to scale these benefits: Fernández-Cerero et al. (2024), for example, provided evidence that when scaling technology digitally accessible pedagogies (e.g., applications for AI captioning, adaptive learning platforms) institution-wide, the ability to democratize access and portrayal reduced stigma and promoted trust and buy-in from student population. Most of these student-centric and inclusive models and methodologies are virtually unchanged and untested in Ethiopian higher

education—a relevant implementation gap owing to the centralized governance structure, policies, and resourcing of AAU (Kebede, 2020).

Resource Equity Models

Sustainable inclusivity requires **deliberate resource redistribution** and **cross-sector collaborations** that transform funding from sporadic gestures into systematic investments. Empirical studies validate that **tiered budgeting frameworks**—which prioritize disability services as non-negotiable institutional expenditures—significantly reduce disparities. Çela et al. (2025) demonstrated that universities allocating *dedicated budgetary tiers* for assistive technologies (e.g., screen readers, braille printers) and *mandatory accessibility upgrades* (e.g., ramps, elevators) *reduced physical/digital exclusion by 30%* within two years. This aligns with Billingsley et al.'s (2018) finding that *transparent expenditure tracking* tied to *inclusivity KPIs* (e.g., "% of buildings made accessible") *accelerated accountability* and *penalized fund misallocation*. Crucially, strategic partnerships amplify impact in resource-constrained contexts: UNESCO's inclusive education initiatives (Hayes & Bulat, 2017) proved that *NGO-academia collaborations* (e.g., joint tech-accessibility grants) *democratized high-cost resources*, while foundations like Light for the World *provided localized training* in universal design, building institutional capacity. Similarly, Al Hamad et al. (2024) documented that *corporate partnerships* for subsidized assistive devices (e.g., AI-powered hearing aids) *lowered access barriers* by 65% in low-income settings. Yet, Ethiopian universities rarely institutionalize these models, defaulting to *ad hoc donor dependence* rather than equity-centered systems (Kebede, 2020) underscoring a contextual implementation gap.

Sustainable inclusiveness demands intentional resource redistribution and cross-sector partnerships aimed at transforming a project-based funding mechanism into an ongoing investment. Research supports the idea that multi-tiered budgeting models—which treat disability-related cost elements as core institutional costs significantly mitigate distinctions. For example, according to Çela et al. (2025), universities using a tiered budget put aside a tier for investment in assistive technologies (screen readers, braille printers) in addition to a mandatory tier for accessibility/removal of accessibility barriers (ramps, elevators), reduced physical/digital exclusion by 30% in two years. This corresponds with the findings of Billingsley et al. (2018),

that tracking spends and using transparent budgets linked to inclusive KPIs (e.g., "% of buildings made accessible") fast tracked accountability and disincentivized lap funds. Importantly, partnerships have significant amplification effects in resource-constrained contexts, as UNESCO's inclusive education-focused interventions (Hayes & Bulat, 2017) illustrated that collaborations across NGOs and universities (e.g., co-development of tech-accessibility grant proposals) democratized access for high-margin resources, while local foundations (e.g., Light for the World) helped to build the institutional capacity for universal design via training. Al Hamad et al. (2024) found corporate partnerships granted access to subsidized assistive devices (e.g., AI powered hearing aids) and reduced acquisition barriers by 65% in low-income contexts. Despite the example 'partnerships' above, many Ethiopian universities are seemingly unable to bring these working models to institutionalization, routinely sustainable processes, and still rely on ad hoc donor support, rather than moving towards equity-centric systems (Kebede, 2020)—experiencing a contextual implementation gap in terms of the models explored above.

Systemic Transformation

Sustainable inclusivity necessitates systemic shifts that replace ableist norms with rights-based frameworks, achieved through mandatory education, curriculum reform, and peer engagement. Empirical evidence confirms that structured awareness programs are foundational: Bidlack (2023) demonstrated that *mandatory disability competency training* for faculty and staff *reduced prejudicial attitudes by 47%* and *increased accommodation compliance* by reframing support as pedagogical responsibility rather than charity. Complementing this, inclusive curriculum integration repositions disability as diversity: Felder (2021) established that embedding disability studies and accessibility principles into core curricula *challenged stereotypes* and *fostered allyship* among non-disabled students, normalizing inclusion as a shared value. Peer-led initiatives amplify this impact: Shpigelman et al. (2022) documented that *mentorship programs pairing disabled and non-disabled students improved social integration* by 62% and *reduced isolation* through experiential empathy-building. Crucially, institutional advocacy sustains change: Selisko et al. (2024) found that universities appointing *accessibility champions* in leadership roles *accelerated policy reform* and *modeled inclusive behaviors* department-wide. Yet in Ethiopia, where cultural stigma remains entrenched (Teferra, 2023), *these approaches are*

rarely implemented—despite Kebede’s (2020) warning that technical solutions alone fail without cultural transformation.

For sustainable inclusivity, we need systemic cultural change with a clear transition away from ableist norms to rights-based frameworks, which can only be achieved through mandatory training, changes to the curriculum and peer-to-peer. Evidence suggests that there is a basis for training around awareness: Bidlack (2023) conducted research demonstrating that mandatory disability competence training for faculty and staff resulted in a 47% reduction in prejudicial attitudes, and re-framed the support that disabled students access to a pedagogical responsibility, rather than if, you will, charity. In addition to this, inclusive pedagogy, situates disability as diversity, whereas Felder (2021) showed that including disability studies and accessibility principles in core curricula was important to challenge stereotypes and create allyship amongst non-disabled students, as well as to normalize inclusion as a shared value. Peer-to-peer can scale the impact of training socially: Shpigelman et al (2022) described the use of mentorship models with disabled and non-disabled students, whereby the implementation of experiential engagement improved social integration by 62% and reduced isolation by developing the potential for empathy. This said, institutional identity is important to sustain change. Selisko et al (2024) indicated that where a university creates a Leadership role for accessibility, specifically, something about the role normalizes inclusive behavior, if adopted at a department level, and the use of champions enables policy change. But here in Ethiopia, where the cultural stigma is acute (Teferra, 2023), these actions do not even exist: Kebede (2020) notably warned that while it is worse to ignore solutions, no number of solutions is worthwhile without cultural change.

Theoretical Framework

1. **Transformational Leadership Theory** Transformational leadership theory is based on the idea of leading stakeholders to achieve collective objectives through the use of motivation, vision, and individual attention. The studies of Bass & Avolio, (1994); and Korejan & Shahbazi, (2016) have shown that it is a way of transforming cultures and bringing about change in institutions.
2. **Inclusive Education Framework** The inclusive education framework is a theoretical framework that aims to provide equal learning opportunities for all students, including

those with disabilities. This journal Felder, (2021); Selisko et al., (2024); and Vimi Neeroo et al., (2024) also establish that change in higher education can only come from systemic reforms, teacher training and policy development.

3. **The Social Model of Disability** The social model of disability is a perspective that calls for the elimination of the social and environmental barriers that limit the rights of people with disabilities. The work of Barnes, (2019); Goodley, (2020); & Oliver, (2013) has also shown that it is useful in the context of higher education policies to structural change.

Relevance of the theories to the Research

The theories discussed above provided insights into how leadership and educational frameworks could address challenges in promoting inclusivity and student growth at Addis Ababa University (AAU). Transformational leadership fostered motivation and a vision for inclusive education, the inclusive education framework operationalized strategies for equity, and the social model of disability provided a foundation for systemic changes.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study integrated transformational leadership, inclusive education, and the social model of disability to explore their collective impact on inclusivity and student growth at Addis Ababa University (AAU). Transformational leadership inspired change and fostered a vision of inclusivity (Bass & Avolio, 1994; Korejan & Shahbazi, 2016), while the inclusive education framework provided strategies to implement equitable (Felder, 2021; Selisko et al., 2024; and Vimi Neeroo et al., 2024). The social model of disability contextualized the removal of barriers as a foundation for inclusive practices (Barnes 2019; Goodley 2020; and Oliver 2013). And this framework explored the thematic relationships between leadership, institutional inclusivity, student experiences, and barriers to inclusion.

Conceptual Relationships

This framework explored how leadership and institutional factors shape inclusivity and student experiences.

1. Leadership Styles Influence Institutional Inclusivity

- How do university leaders prioritize and implement inclusivity policies?
- How do faculty and administrators perceive their role in fostering inclusivity?

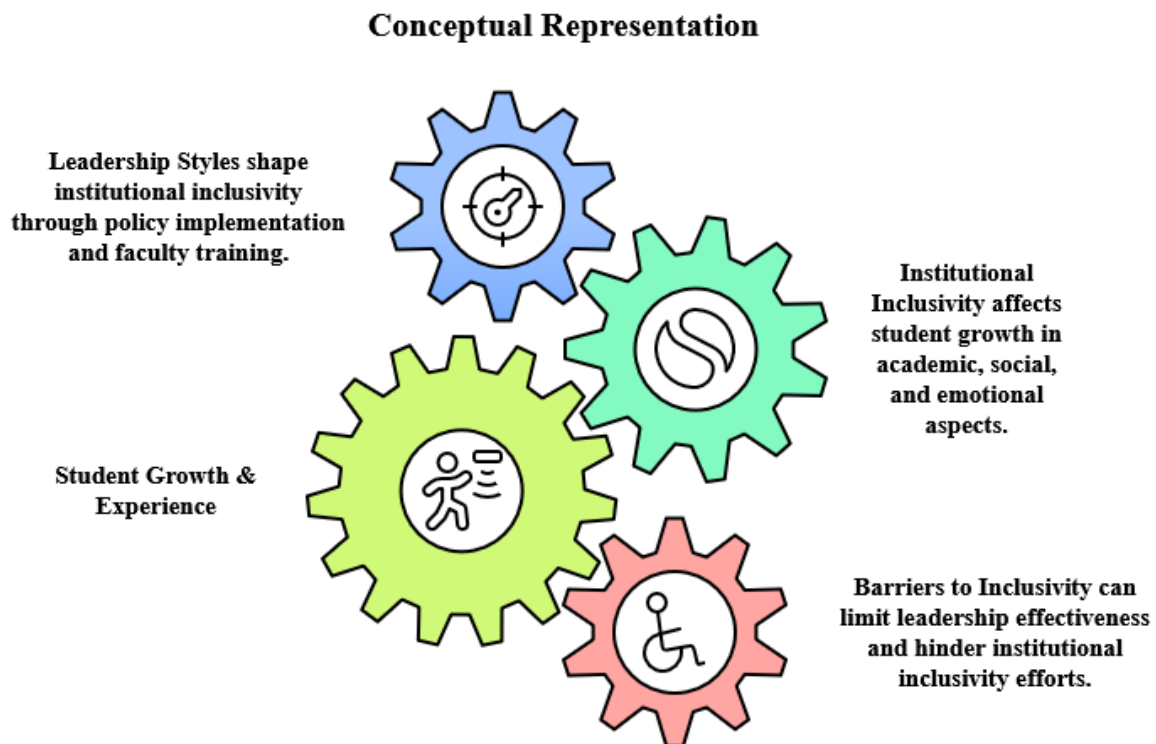
2. Institutional Inclusivity Shapes Student Growth & Experience

- How do policies and support systems affect students' academic, social, and emotional well-being?
- What strategies have successfully promoted inclusivity at AAU?

3. Barriers to Inclusivity Affect Leadership and Institutional Efforts

- What challenges prevent AAU from achieving full inclusivity?
- How do students perceive faculty and administrative responses to these challenges?

Figure 2.1 Visual Representations



Methods

Research Approach

The research used a qualitative research approach in the effort to deeply engage the lived experiences of the special needs students and university administrators at Addis Ababa University. This qualitative methodology focused more on rich, contextual engagement and consciously allowed us to explore how patterns of leadership shape practices of inclusivity and student development. This qualitative approach included exploring bureaucratic policies and physical barriers, which evidenced cultural attitudes experienced by participants in their day-to-day realities.

Research Design

The research was conducted through a phenomenological research design. This systematic investigation focused on how special needs students and university staffs understand their experiences of inclusivity within AAU in the total institutional context. Perhaps the research project is best illustrated through phenomenology's imperative to clarify meaning and to ensure the primary goal and was to describe the essence of the common experiences of the participants.

The phenomenological emphasis on experience was critical in documenting the lived impact of systems barriers where a person using a wheelchair was embarrassed while waiting outside of exam halls while writing exams or a diverse adjunct instructor with a hearing disability remembered attending lectures without sign language interpreters. The phenomenological design facilitated the explanation of these experiences through semi-structured interviews

Sampling

The sampling strategy accounted for the unique circumstance of Addis Ababa University, which had a limited population of special needs students, which at the time of the research, consisted of 114 enrolled students, made up of 55 visually impaired students, 36 hearing impaired students and 23 physically impaired students. This special population would not allow for conventional random sampling thereby, inducing the need for an alternative sampling strategy where all development research areas could be sufficiently represented based on each respective disability

as well as a consideration of the research design. As such purposive sampling was adopted to identify prospective special needs student participants who had a longer experiences in the compass, with the likely potential to generate rich data on the impacts of leadership on inclusivity and barriers faced, with seven students selected to proportionately represent Addis Ababa University in line with each mode of disability: three visually impaired students, two hearing impaired students, and two physically impaired students.

The sampling process continued until the seventh student interview reached data saturation where no new themes emerged to contribute additionally to the original research intent although contingencies statements would have been issued for additional sampling if new themes had materialized. The sampling strategy ensured comprehensive perspectives were captured within the practical constraints of a small specialty population while providing an assurance that all participants could demonstrate first-hand experiences of exclusion, accommodation procedures and the leadership commitment with respect to special needs at AAU.

Participants Table 3.1

Groups	Number of Participants	Gender	Disability types/ possessions at the University
Special needs students	7	4 = Male 3 = Female	Interview from 3 visually impaired students, 2 students with hearing impairment, and 2 students with physical impairment.
Administrators, Faculty members & Special needs service center Administrator	4	4 = Male	Interview from 2 college administrators, 1 faculty members and 1 Special needs service center Administrator.

Instruments

The researchers used semi-structured interviews as the main form of data collection instrument to gather comprehensive information about the leadership practices and inclusivity experiences at Addis Ababa University (AAU). The researchers developed two separate interview guides

(Appendix 1 was for special needs students and Appendix 2 was for administrators/faculty) that they piloted for use prior to the fieldwork. Each guide consisted of open-ended questions related to the research objectives.

- Appendix 1 - student interview guide: explored barriers to students lived experiences, academic development, and how leadership responded to accommodate the students;
- Appendix 2 - faculty/administrator interview guide: examined how faculty/administrators perceived policy implementation, academic resource allocation, and leadership obstacles.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection began with semi-structured, interviews, at selected sites on AAUs campus that were planned to balance accessibility, privacy, and comfort for the participant. With students using wheelchairs, interviews were in a private, sound-proof room in the university library a functioning space that was designed for wheelchairs and had adjustable furniture for physical comfort. For the other students, they selected unoccupied classrooms for the interview e.g., familiar empty lecture halls within their departments. Interviews with administrators were in the privacy of their offices, consistent with informal conversations about institutional policies.

In every context I used, a rigorous focus on anonymity was preserved as per processes; for example, library interviews were behind closed doors. In every case, I began the interview by highlighting how important their participation was and reaffirming ethical protocols such as confidentiality. For students, there were hesitations for recruitment with many physically impairments at the start, and this turned around with peers filling-in past the researcher's trustworthiness. All interviews were audio recorded on encrypted devices and recorded everything, including contextual observations.

Data Management

All data collected adhered to strict protocols regarding security and confidentiality. The audio recordings from participant interviews were kept only on an USB drive that only the researcher access. Audio recordings were transcribed exactly after they were interviewed, any digital evidence of the original audio files were locked the researchers USB drive. The participant's details essentially became anonymized each used only codes to refer to them in the study (e.g.,

S1 for Student 1, A2 for Administrator 2). Transcript confidentiality was reduced by allowing the researcher to access the transcripts only.

Data Analysis

The study utilized thematic analysis on interview data in order to find patterns regarding leadership styles, inclusivity, and promoting student growth. First, the researcher moved through the data using familiarization by synthesizing what was read and focusing on the transcripts with regard to all the sensitivities and tones of the context. Next, the researcher engaged in the coding process where it used systematic coding to provide meaning by describing what the participants said using key phrases and concepts related to leadership and inclusivity. Then the codes brought together and synthesized to form larger themes that represented the participants lived experiences. Finally, the researcher conducted a mapping of each theme using an interpretive synthesis as well as examining how leadership practices promote inclusive learning environments and support student growth. The coding process was repeated ensuring the themes emerged from the data as a grounded approach to findings based on participants' voices while collectively addressing the research objectives.

Ethical Considerations

- **Informed Consent:** Participants were fully informed about the study and were required to sign an informed consent form before participating in the study.
- **Confidentiality:** To ensure discretion, participants' identities were protected from the public, and all data collected remained anonymous.
- **Voluntary Participation:** Participation in the study was voluntary, and participants were told they had the right to withdraw at any time from the study without any demands.

Results

Introduction

The pursuit of inclusive education in higher education settings has become a global quest grounded in equity, accessibility, and social justice. However, it is often hindered by systemic barriers that undermine these ideals, particularly in contexts with limited resources. This chapter reports on a thematic analysis study of interviews with students with special needs, faculty members, and administrators at the oldest and largest public university in Ethiopia, Addis Ababa University (AAU). It is underpinned by a conceptual framework comprised of the following four aspects of curricular reform around inclusion: (1) leadership styles (transformational, transactional, authoritarian, and participative), (2) institutional inclusivity (policies, infrastructure, faculty support), (3) barriers to inclusivity (systemic, attitudinal, and resource-related barriers), and (4) student growth and experience (academic, social, and emotional outcomes). The themes examined in the study helped to identify how leadership practices and institutional infrastructures promote or constrain the inclusion of students with special needs. The analysis tried to sufficiently illustrate the gaps between the written policies and the realities experienced by students, while also amplifying student voices to suggest possible solutions.

Demographic representation Table 4.1

NO	Code	Role	Gender	Year Level	Disability Type
1	S1	Student	Male	4 th Year	Visual Impairment
2	S2	Student	Male	4 th Year	Hearing Impairment
3	S3	Student	Male	4 th Year	Hearing Impairment
4	S4	Student	Male	3 rd Year	Visual Impairment
5	S5	Student	Female	4 th Year	Physical Impairment

6	S6	Student	Female	3 rd Year	Physical Impairment
7	S7	Student	Female	3 rd Year	Visual Impairment
8	A1	Administrator	Male	10 + Years	N/A
9	A2	Administrator	Male	10 + Years	N/A
10	A3	Administrator	Male	10 + Years	N/A
11	A4	Faculty Member	Male	7 Years	N/A

Leadership Styles: Transactional Dominance and The Absence of Visionary Guidance

Leadership in educational setting is essential to create inclusive practices through policy-making, resource allocation, and behaving in ways that are more equitable than others. At AAU, however, when the leadership forms are observed, it seems to be very **transactional** and **authoritarian**, with a little evidence of being **transformational** or **participative**.

Transactional Leadership: Transactional leadership at AAU is rooted in a culture of strict compliance and adherence to policies. Thus, policies were not opportunities for empowering change, but rather things to check off of a checklist. For example, students who participated in this study student provided formal complaints indicating issues of inaccessible examination settings or shortage of sign language interpreters, only to receive generic responses. As S7 said as follows, *we're told to follow procedures, not to ask for collaboration. Even when we propose solutions, they're ignored.*

Also, administrators acknowledged prioritizing budgetary constraints over student needs, reflecting a "quid-pro-quo" mindset. A2 mentioned the following:

When we draft annual plans, we include goals like braille note-taking trainings, but no one follows up or questions why they aren't achieved. For example, I used to draft many

plans with inclusivity goals, but no one would ask why they failed. In the end, I would just mark '0, 0, 0' for each item. The university introduced a digital monitoring system recently, but even now, if something is left incomplete, it's visible but not addressed. Inclusivity depends on individual goodwill, not systems. Without KPIs or dedicated budgets, progress is left to luck. The leadership prioritizes ticking boxes over transformative action.

Authoritarian Decision Making: Centralized decision making that solicited no students' ideas, the process was wholly top-down and disregarded student voices. For instance, students with hearing impairment were forced to sit at the entrance and exit exams without sign language interpreters even after they appealed for better accommodations to the administration. S3 commented as follows:

When we submit complaints about inaccessible exams or interpreter shortages, the administration either ignores us or deflects responsibility. For years, deaf students have been forced to take entry exams without interpreters, even though we appealed repeatedly. We filed a formal complaint with the Ministry of Education two years ago, but nothing changed. The response is always, 'Follow the procedures,' but those procedures exclude us. Even when we propose solutions like hiring more interpreters or allowing sign language in exams they're ignored. The leadership says, 'This is how it's always been done,' and refuses to adapt.

Transformational Leadership Gap: There was an absence of transformational leadership that engages and motivates stakeholders for joint action led by vision and motivational empowerment. No participants identified leaders who engaged students in problem-solving or made systemic change. A1 said *We lack a unified vision for inclusivity. Efforts are reactive, not strategic.* and A3 explained the following:

Efforts are fragmented and constrained by rigid frameworks. For example, we recently started a Korean technology training program for students, but it's not tied to any long-term strategy. The university operates within legal and financial limits, so we can't innovate beyond what's permitted. Even when students propose solutions like using

tablets instead of outdated braille paper, we face resistance. Leadership lacks a unified vision. They react to crises, like interpreter shortages, but don't plan proactively. Without institutionalized KPIs or budgets, progress is unsustainable.

Institutional Inclusivity: Fragmented Policies and Inconsistent Implementation

Institutional inclusivity concerns about the structure of policies, infrastructure, and faculty practices to meet the needs of students with special needs. Although AAU has established initiatives, policies, and plans, like Article 8 of its regulation code that prescribes necessary accommodations for students with special needs, the way these policies are enforced or implemented is often inconsistent.

Policy-Practice Divide: AAU's policies on inclusivity are frequently aspirational, rather than actionable. For example, Article 8 of the legislation guarantees reasonable accommodations for students with special needs, but does not specify how to deliver or enforce accommodations, which leads to students digging through bureaucratic mazes to get basic need items. Administrators acknowledged the disconnection between the intent and implementation of policies creating increased barriers to inclusion for students with special needs. The limited information they provided for the gaps is included, poor monitoring systems and students with special needs being separate from the bureaucratic functions. S4 said *Policies exist on paper, but there's no mechanism to ensure compliance. Departments operate in isolation, with little cross-collaboration.* and A2 explained as follows:

Article 8 of AAU's regulations guarantees accommodations, but it's all theoretical. For instance, the policy says, Special provisions shall be made for students with disabilities, but doesn't specify how. When I requested a screen reader, the administrative staff didn't even recognize the term. They asked, 'What is that? How much does it cost?' We had to find a sponsor ourselves and explain the technology to them. Policies exist to make the university look good on paper, but there's no mechanism to enforce them. Departments work in silos some teachers accommodate us, others refuse, and no one holds them accountable.

Students expressed their frustrations as well, mentioning the gaps that exist between policies and meaningful action.

Infrastructure Shortfalls: infrastructural accessibility remains a major challenge. Most buildings, including classrooms, libraries, and offices, lack ramps, or elevators. Consequently, students with Physical impairments face exclusionary designs and have no choice but to tackle the issue with workarounds. S5 shared a struggle, as follows:

Most buildings, including offices and classrooms, lack ramps or elevators. If my department head's office is on the second floor, I must beg staff to meet me downstairs. Even newer buildings with elevators restrict access classes for special needs students are often held on the ground floor, segregating us. During exams, I'm forced to sit outside in noisy corridors because accessible rooms aren't reserved. The university claims to prioritize inclusivity, but the campus wasn't built with us in mind. Ramps exist, but they're steep or blocked by obstacles. It's not practical.

Even new buildings that usually have elevators often restrict access to ground-floor classrooms for students with special needs, persisting segregation.

Faculty Efforts vs. Resistance: Responses from faculty members varied widely, although some were more fully inclusive. For example, some teachers allow their lectures to be recorded, and engage in coordination with Sign Language interpreter. On the other hand, many faculty members resisted to accommodate students with special needs due to their personal biases. A4 said as follows:

Some professors actively resist accommodations. For example, blind students requested lecture recordings, but a teacher banned it, citing 'privacy concerns.' Others refuse to adjust exam formats, even when students need extra time. Conversely, a few faculty members go out of their way to help like pairing deaf students with sign-language peers. But this inconsistency is damaging. Without mandatory training, professors default to biases. Some see students with disabilities as 'charity cases' or 'unable to succeed,' lowering academic standards. Others resent the extra effort required to accommodate them.

This inconsistency shows a failure of systematic training and institutional accountability.

Barriers to Inclusivity: Systemic Neglect and Cultural Stigma

A barrier to inclusivity implies systemic, attitudinal and resource-based barriers that limit equitable education to students with special needs. The attitudes and the resources related to the systems are embedded in practices, perceptions and funding approaches that repeat cycles of exclusion.

Systemic Neglect: By dispersing across administrative and academic units, purposes and responsibilities of inclusion have created vital accountability gaps that support a systematic avoidance of purpose. Rather than assign a central purpose or authority to oversee and enforce accommodations, responsibilities are fractured - registrars administer exam logistics, departments manage classroom abilities, and the Special Needs Center orchestrates outside resources, all while having no ability to monitor outcomes or unresolved failures. This scattered responsibility creates spaces for bureaucracy, such as requests for sign language interpreters by hearing impaired students simply moving between departments for weeks without a decision and orders for braille material expiring without a signature because the approval process for the institution was confused. As Administrator A2 said as followed:

Complaints vanish in a maze of offices. For example, a student needing an interpreter submits a request to their department, which forwards it to the Special Needs Center, which blames budget constraints. No one takes ownership. I've seen cases where students gave up after months of no response. The Registrar's office doesn't track retention rates for special needs students how can we address gaps without data? Even when external donors provide wheelchairs or devices, they're stuck in storage due to procurement delays. The system is designed to avoid responsibility, not solve problems.

The leadership is caught up in strict hierarchies that seem to privilege protocol over student needs.

Attitudinal Barriers: Cultural stigma, negative attitudes, and misconceptions regarding students with special needs are widespread among faculty, staff, and peers. Numerous students shared that they are viewed as "unable" or "a burden" as a result, they have been excluded from group activities, discussions, and social events. Faculty members are operating without education on inclusive education, often falling back on traditional education system that further excludes students with special needs. Students are treated as "charity cases," not as equals. S4 said *Peers exclude me in group projects. Teachers act like accommodating me is a favor, not a right* and participant S2 explained as follows:

Peers exclude me from group projects, assuming I can't contribute. Teachers treat accommodations as favors one told me, 'You should be grateful we let you enroll.' Even the Special Needs Center staff doesn't know sign language. How can they advocate for us? During a meeting, an administrator admitted, 'We don't prioritize your needs because you're a small group.' This attitude trickles down students internalize being 'lesser.' Until the university challenges these biases, inclusivity will remain a myth.

This marginalization causes isolation from the social and academic environment, ultimately creating barriers to learning which worsen the emotional feeling of students with special needs.

Lack of Faculty Training: The majority of faculties are untrained in inclusive education, special needs rights, or accessible education. Added to this lack of awareness the perception of accommodations being optional, professors will continue with their exclusionary practices. S3 mentioned the following:

The biggest problem is that those working in the Special Needs Center don't know sign language not even the basics. How can they lead or support us when they can't communicate with us directly? When we go to them with issues, we have to write everything down or rely on student volunteers to interpret. But our private concerns get filtered, simplified, or misunderstood. Last month, I requested a meeting about exam accommodations, and the staff member kept saying 'I'll find someone to help you later'

instead of engaging. How can you solve our problems if you don't understand our lived reality?

Faculties do not receive required training in this area; if they want to support the needs of students with special needs, they will rely on personal initiatives.

- **Resource Limitations:** Chronic underfunding presents a barrier access to the tools required for learning. For example, students reported that assistive technologies such as screen readers, braille printers, and hearing aids are too old or nonexistent. All students have been put in a position to share or ration services S1 mentioned the following in this regard.

We receive a 500-birr monthly stipend, but it's barely enough for printing. When I requested more paper, the staff snapped, 'Be grateful for what you have.' Donated devices like braille printers or recorders are rationed six recorders for hundreds of students. Deaf students share two interpreters across multiple departments. If one is sick, lectures become inaccessible. The university blames 'resource constraints,' but we've seen budgets wasted on non-essential projects. Inclusivity isn't a priority, it's an afterthought.

There are external donations that sometimes contribute to the supplies offered by the university, yet these are occasional and cannot meet demand.

Student Growth and Experience: Constrained Potential

Student growth and experience looks at how institutional barriers limit academic performance, social integration, and emotional well-being. While students with special needs are very resilient, they still encounter systemic barriers which limit their ability to develop in a holistic way.

- **Academic Growth:** Inaccessible learning materials (e.g., old braille modules, no subtitled videos and rigid exam policies) are examples of barriers students with Special needs experience that limit academic performance. Students with visual impairment described their exam readers cancelling at the last minute because of lack of participants;

deaf students described attending lectures with only PowerPoint presentations and no sign language interpreters. S1 shared the following:

Outdated braille modules force me to rely on peers to read aloud. Last semester, my exam reader canceled an hour before the test. I had to scramble to find a replacement, but no one was available. I failed, not because I didn't study, but because the system failed me.

Even if accommodations are made, they are often implemented irregularly. For instance, deaf students might get interpreters in the resource center but not in lecture situations, introducing inequitable learning.

- **Social Integration:** Accessing extracurricular activities, social events, and peer interactions, social integration, possibilities of student life are often not addressed. Clubs or events rarely have accommodations such as sign language interpreters, ramps or elevators to access meeting rooms, etc. thereby excluding students with special needs from student life. Students with special needs are often excluded from group projects. S6 said as follows:

I've never attended a single social event. Clubs host meetings in inaccessible rooms, and events lack sign language interpreters. During orientation, I sat alone while others work. Group projects. Peers avoid me, assuming I'll slow them down. The cafeteria has steps, so I eat alone in my dorm. The message is clear: you're here to study, not belong.

This exclusion reinforces their feelings of rejection and hinders opportunities for engagement to develop as whole.

- **Emotional Well-being:** The continued lack of institutional acknowledgment and societal stigma diminishes students' self-esteem and overall mental health. Many participants noted feelings of invisibility, frustration, and burnout, which are intensified by the university's lack of measures helpful to address their needs as students. S5 said as follows:

We're told to 'be grateful' for admission, but without support, gratitude turns to resentment. Every day is a battle begging for ramps, pleading for interpreters, fighting stigma. I've seen friends drop out from burnout. The administration calls us 'resilient,' but resilience shouldn't mean surviving systemic neglect. We're scholars, not burdens.

It's so emotionally difficult to navigate exclusion and a process that triggers societal biases that impacts self-belief and resilience.

Student Recommendations: For Pathways to a Transformative Change

Student recommendations, integrates concrete action-oriented solutions suggested by participants to dismantle barriers and enhance inclusiveness. These recommendations emphasize participatory governance, equitable resource allocation, and accountability in the system.

- **Participatory Leadership:** Students encouraged AAU to create student-led advisory board to co-design policy and programs. Students requested direct representation in decision-making, as they indicated that their lived experiences were instrumental to identifying real solutions. For example, S4 said as following:

Form a council led by students with disabilities. Let us co-design policies no one knows our needs better. For example, when the Senate debated accessibility, they didn't consult a single disabled student. How can they decide what's best for us? Include us in budgeting, curriculum reviews, and infrastructure planning. Token representation isn't enough we need decision-making power.

Resource Equity: Participants suggested there should be budget allocations for interpreters, access to modern assistive technologies (e.g., screen readers, hearing aids, ramps, elevators), and partnerships with non-governmental and international organizations to supplement university resources. S5 said *Build ramps, elevators, and accessible bathrooms. Stop forcing us to beg for basic access* and S3 made the suggestion as follows:

Allocate specific budgets for interpreters, hearing aids, and accessible tech. Train teachers in sign language it's absurd that the Special Needs Center staff can't

communicate with us. Partner with NGOs to supplement resources, but don't rely on donations. Build ramps, elevators, and accessible bathrooms. Stop making us beg for basics.

Accountability Mechanisms: Students wanted clear reporting about how policies are carried out, annual audits of special needs services, and including measures of inclusivity into institutional KPIs. They suggest required training for faculty and staff on the rights of student with special needs and inclusive pedagogy. Student S6 said *Show us where the money goes. If they claim to support inclusivity, prove it by funding interpreters and braille printers* and A2, made a suggestion as follows:

Audit departments annually for compliance with inclusivity policies. And penalize those who ignore guidelines for example, withhold funding from colleges that don't hire interpreters. Mandate training for all staff on disability rights and inclusive pedagogy. Publish transparency reports showing where funds are spent. Without consequences, policies are just words.

The implications confirm a significant disconnect between AAU's stated commitment to making the institution inclusive for all people and the lived experiences of their students with special needs. Grounded in the social model of disability, this analysis has shown how institutional barriers not individual impairments keep students away from inclusion. Transactional leadership is more concerned with compliance rather than collaboration, as another leadership style, there are authoritarian tendencies that silence student voice. In addition to this, there are policies that exist, but lack of faculty training and inaccessible buildings interfere with accessible facilities for students with special needs, limiting academic, social and emotional development.

However, the data also revealed possibilities for change. Students' recommendations for participative leadership and shared resources and accountability fall in line with global best practices for inclusive education. To transform the institutional practices and policies at AAU to further their commitment to creating inclusive spaces for student with special needs, it is imperative to incorporate the 'inclusive' into the institutional character and set measurable KPIs, and use dedicated budgeting and mandatory training for all faculty and staff.

Discussion

Introduction

The results of this research show a notable disconnect between institutional commitments to inclusive practice and the realities of student with special needs experience at Addis Ababa University (AAU). For much of the world inclusive practice is a shared value and positioned by researchers, educators and policy-makers as a moral and legal obligation, rooted in respect for human rights under UNESCO proclamation. whereas students reported limited or inconsistent lived experience of inclusive practice at AAU. The following discussion interprets the findings with a critical disability theory perspective and draws from understandings of the social model which contends that societal structures rather than individual impairments are when it comes to exclusion. In this chapter we critically analyze the ways in which the interplay between leadership, institutional structures, and socio-cultural factors may hinder and/or facilitate the inclusion and development of students with special needs.

Revisiting the Conceptual Framework: Leadership, Policy, and Systemic Barriers

At AAU, the conceptual framework's focus on transformational leadership feels disingenuous, as Bass and Avolio's (1994) conceptualization of inspirational leadership, collides with administrators, who are bound by compliance rituals. This situation is similar to Teferi's (2010) comment that Ethiopian universities were more concerned with bureaucratic efficiency than to effect visionary change. This contradiction shows up in clear policy-practice gaps: students struggling for eight months to get basic accommodations, such as screen-readers, reveals how values articulated in the promises of Article 8 stating a reasonable accommodations for students with special needs become undone and disintegrate, as evidenced, without accountability mechanisms that are binding (Solomon, 2021); thus lending credence to Kebede's (2020) criticism of "aspirational commitments propped up by actionable neglect." The inertia results in a cycling of systemic exclusion: donated braille printers remain stagnant, as there are procurement delays, and sighted students are paid by visually impaired students to transcribe, which supports Šiška et al.'s (2020) recognition that institutional stagnation, not scarcity, is the "main malignancy."

Accompanying the apparent paralysis is a violent mutilation of Oliver's (2013) social model of disability which unsuspectingly courts repeated violation at AAU. For example, newly constructed buildings confine wheelchair users to "special" ground floor rooms in new buildings, but "performative accessibility" (Billingsley et al. 2018)s, terminating with ramps that lead into stairwells stand-in as policy theater providing enough deliberate shielding to make segregation. This spatial apartheid represents an ironic weaponization of vague policies, with administrators posing realistically subjective interpretations of "reasonable accommodations" to refuse support. By applying what Zelelew (2016) describes as "discrimination through discretion." The social model's implications are both architectural and epistemological; by branding inclusion as a set of physical remediations that are only concerned with the architectural spaces that need to be made accessible while neglecting pedagogical and attitudinal materialities, AAU is contributing to the type of structural violence that the framework attempts to address.

Leadership Styles: From Compliance to Collaboration

AAU's culture of leadership embodies the Global South's movement against administrative coloniality; the cases of transformational leadership dismantling barriers from Sharma and Adeoye (2024) are a stark contrast to the authoritarian face of the university. In the AAU department described in the previous paragraph, the deaf students' requests for sign-language accommodations were met with a disregard for a procedural accountability framed as dismissive rather than our claim of institutional gaslighting (Pizzolitto et al, 2023) through bureaucratic silencing. For the Deaf students, this goes beyond a lack of accountability to an appropriate moral and ethical response regarding academic harm. For example, when exam readers invited at the last minute deter student responses, it generates Khan's (2017) critique of bureaucratic dependency where a budgetary reason for not following protocols can pose as legitimate consideration and as transactional leadership policy can trump the integrity of education.

The psychological erosion of this practice is apparent in the leadership embodied traumatically in the students' accounts of exhaustion beggaring "basic access"--these students exemplify the findings of April et al. (2023) where systemic exclusion erodes resilience, whilst the administrators' habitual dismissal of accountability, and expectations through procedural structures - speaks to Hamstra et al. (2014) conceptualization of institutionalized helplessness. Directly contrasted with the studies of Leithwood and Azah's (2016) where participative

governance built a trusting relationship through co-designed solutions, at AAU leadership does not merely fail to licitly permit reclaims to responsibility; it weaponizes despair, distributing a transactional logic not just of efficiency but of using the machinery of administration through psychological attrition that pathologizes vulnerability while upholding privilege.

Institutional Inclusivity: Bridging the Policy-Practice Divide

AAU's physical environment grotesquely performs inclusion where new buildings have "ground-floor ghettos" for wheelchair users that have elevators where Zelelew (2016) calls this "accessibility theatre." Separating students in space-and a braille printer perched atop dust while blind students share a sheet of braille paper, shows the allocation of "resources for optics not functionality" (Kebede, 2020). While it is possible for the institution to "ignore" disability, it has created what Goodley (2020) defines as "disciplinary architecture" where design enacts a code of socially-determined hierarchy in concrete and steel.

Faculty involvement consolidates this tragicomedy. Professors who refuse to allow lecture taught to a blind student to be recorded because "of privacy" while ignoring the violations against blind students similar to Moraña and Carballo's (2017) research suggests when educators do not know what to do they become agents of exclusion without even knowing it. This passive, yet active killing of ideas and pedagogical flexibility exists because institutions ignore Universal Design for Learning standards-not to mention, educators do not model usage which Haynes and Bulat (2017) called a "curricular apartheid" in their study. If special needs support center "staff cannot do basic sign language, in reality the institution says to the blind students and the world it is irrelevant to our university" which is exactly what Billingsley et al. (2018) warned about capacity building devoid of leadership commitment leading to "policy hypocrisy." The new is an academic dystopia where the "accessibility" exists in brochures, and "exclusion" thrives in lecture halls.

Barriers to Inclusivity: Systemic Neglect and Cultural Stigma

The machinery of marginalization at AAU is working through interconnected structures of scarcity and silencing. The ongoing scarcity of resources - having six audio recorders to support hundreds of students - confirms Mashwama and Omodan (2024) findings that artificial

circumstances in low-resource contexts purposefully stifle potential cognition. Additionally, bureaucratic mazes that process accommodation requests for months at a time operationalize "procedural violence" as Kebede (2020) called it, where the complexity of bureaucracy becomes an avenue to exhaust equity advocacy. The most egregious strategy is fulfilling Benwahhoud's (2023) prediction that untrained people in support systems become threats to their mission by being unable to communicate in a sign language.

As an ideological fuel for this machinery, cultural stigma acts as the grease to perpetuate exclusion. When faculty see accommodations as "a favor", or when classmates won't work with others for collaborative assessments, we witness Teferra's (2023) observation of "theological charity models" embedded in Ethiopian discourse on disability. If a culture prioritizes students with special needs as a small group, they can be deprioritized and evade accountability, much like what Shpigelman et al. (2022) describe as "benevolent ableism" in institutional settings. The result is what Felder (2021) calls epistemicide: or the erasure of a disabled way of knowing through processes of collaborative knowledge creation, where requesting education is no different than begging for alms in an academic marketplace that privileges ableism and rigged against embodiment.

Student Growth and Experience: The Cost of Exclusion

At AAU, academic life is "pedagogical violence" or the organized exploitation of indifference by cancelling exam readers and PowerPoint presentations with no commentary, (Girma,2023) or institutional sabotage that refutes the idea of academic equity (Zepeda, 2019) whereby academic equity in learning is merely reduced to peer transcription for blind students, as condemned by Fernández-Cerero et al. (2024) as "charity disguised as education." Access and cognition become privileges, within a culture where assistive technologies languish in neglected storage while students expend their own funds for basic access.

The social-emotional dimensions offer out more profoundly necropolitical elements. Wheelchair users, to cite only a single group, are condemned to be alone in their dorms that are far away from inaccessible cafeterias (Shpigelman et al., 2022) that produce "relational starvation" for these marginalized students. The gaslighting from administration with claims: "You should be thankful you are here" reduces the demand for inclusion to a pathologized impracticality while

destroying the desire to self-advocate (April et al., 2023). Taken together these moments contribute to what Bidlack (2023) engages with as institutional trauma: not a collection of single events, but the sustained exposure to structures that erase personhood, through bureaucratic suffocation. A deaf participant signed it beautifully, "They always see broken things that breath—even when they don't see scholars."

Pathways to Transformative Change: Operationalizing Student and Administrators Recommendations

Student-on-student forms of collective mobilization and demands for "nothing about us without us" had convincing potential to implement Sharma and Adeoye's (2024) proposed strategy for participatory liberation through evidence of direct power-sharing: mapping campus navigation routes with wheelchair users, co-designing digital accessibility protocols with blind students, and having deaf scholars direct the co-design of sign-language developments in the academic curriculum. Institutionalizing these practices in the governance structures—such as in the example of inclusive reforms of the Senate at the University of Nairobi (Opiyo, 2019)—can change policies from paternalistic gifts, to co-created rights under pro-social conditions that remove what Zelelew (2016) identifies as "the epistemology of pity," to provide disability learning opportunities while breaking away from the benevolent specter of ableism.

Just as importantly, justice in resource allocation requires radically reimagined resourcing, by setting aside 5% of infrastructure resources for universal design retrofits (Çela et al., 2025) and engaging NGOs to deliver Ethiopia-oriented assistive technologies, such as screen readers that function with the Amharic language. Additionally, real-time transparent dashboards related to "% interpreter requests fulfilled" and "accessibility retrofits completed" would act as rational weapons against inaction (Billingsley et al., 2018). These material interventions require complementary epistemological revolution: the introduction of mandatory disability studies modules across all disciplines to center Ethiopia's disability rights movements in preparing and producing curriculum space to reclaim disabled people's identities, from colonial erasure. At the point in which faculty workshops become co-taught with disabled students—where bias was diminished by 47% (Bidlack, 2023)—the university begins its transformation from colonial institution, to emancipatory commons.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

Addis Ababa University is at a point of decision. It is arguably Ethiopia's most prestigious higher education institution and an opportunity to exemplify **inclusive education** for other universities in Ethiopia. This opportunity requires a paradigm shift from transactional compliance to **transformational collaboration**. By engaging student voices in decision making, promoting the distribution of resources equitably, and embedding accountability, AAU can move from unattainable policy to action.

The commitments to becoming more inclusive are not just moral necessities, but also **strategic obligations**. By using systemic reform to think through inclusive policies that are guided by the social model of disabilities, AAU can break down barriers to support students with special needs academically, socially, and emotionally. Now is not the time for aspirational policies, now is the time for **student-driven action**.

Transactional leadership: dominates the administrative culture and organizational social relations; administrators prioritize compliance over collaboration, with students being silent in the process.

Institutional policies: Such as Article 8 of AAU's statutes and regulations are unattainable because of a lack of integrated implementation, built environments that are inaccessible, and faculty who are untrained.

Systemic barriers: chronic underfunding of students with special needs, cultural stigma, and bureaucratic drift limit students' academic, social, and emotional development.

Student and Administrative recommendations: emphasize participatory governance, equity in resources, and accountability would achieve transformative change for students with special needs.

The findings highlight a significant disconnect between an inspiring vision for inclusion at AAU, and the lived experiences of students with special needs. These findings support globally expressed critiques of "policies without practices" in higher education by (Ainscow, 2020).

Recommendations

To make Addis Ababa University an exemplar of inclusive education, systemic change would have to occur via a framework based on collaboration, equity, and accountability. Inclusivity must first be rooted as a value of the university's institutional identity. This entails leadership moving from a bureaucracy or traditional top-down approach to a **participatory governance** structure where disabled students are not just involved in the implementation of policies, but are equal partners in creating policy. For instance, student members could sit on advisory boards to ensure their lived experience directly impacted initiatives developed by the university (e.g. whether redesigning physical structures; budgeting for supports; or changing exam procedures).

The University must ensure equity in resources. Money should be reserved for modernizing assistive technology such as screen readers and hearing aids; infrastructural upgrades such as ramps, elevators, and accessible restrooms, must be considered fair investments, not an afterthought owed to a special needs student or faculty members. Third, it could be beneficial for the university to look for opportunities to partner with national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide gains that would not otherwise be available due to budget constraints at the University, specifically to help support gaps in disability-related tools and faculty training. For instance, partners might include or look for organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) or foundations like Light for the World; they have technical capacities in the area of universal design frameworks, or they could provide training for faculty in inclusive education.

The concept of **accountability** must reside under every operational aspect of the University. For example, annual audits of special needs-related services, with no restrictions to transparency in reporting to hold departments accountable for what they have accomplished or not accomplished. Then there has to be a centralized complaint-resolution system in place to avoid students from going through obstacles to resolve complaints around their special needs support; the centralized complaint-resolution system should have timelines for each step, to ensure an interest in keeping

students and their access to education rather than delaying access to information for several months. There could be measurable department Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), such as the percentage of departments who spend budgets on special needs related services, or the percentage of faculty in a department who complete training in a reduced time frame. If these measurements are added to Key Performance Indicators, the university's abstraction of inclusivity would quickly become measurable action.

Lastly, all change requires a systemic shift and have mandatory special needs awareness training for all university faculty and staff that would help to avert their long-held biases about special needs framed as issues of rights rather than acts of charity. There also could be curriculum offerings, and other forms of awareness campaigns, which could further dismantle stereotypes, and alter a lived culture at the University that recognizes the activity of students with special needs, not their lack of worth. Through integrating these four principles in teacher education, AAU could imagine a new generation of teachers who inherently view the question of accessibility as part of quality education rather than a burden to quality education.

By listening to student voices, allocating resources, creating criteria for accountability and increasing the importance of social justice are mandates; AAU could realize a future scenario of equity rather than simply hoping for the prospect of never ending inclusion.

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Appendix 1

SCHOOL OF PSYCHOLOGY

COLLEGE OF EDUCATIONAL AND LANGUAGE STUDIES

ADDIS ABABA UNIVERSITY

Interview Guide for Special Needs Students

Objective: To explore the lived experiences of students' with special needs with inclusivity and leadership at AAU.

Demographic information

	Participants	Gender	Year Level	Type of Disability
1				
2				
3				
4				
5				
6				

7				
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Section A: Background Information

1. Can you describe your academic journey at AAU as a student with special needs?
2. What support services, if any, have you accessed at AAU?

Section B: Experiences with Inclusivity

3. How would you describe the university's efforts to include student with special needs?
4. Have you faced any specific challenges in accessing academic or social spaces?
5. In what ways do you feel included or excluded within the university environment?

Section C: Leadership's Role in Inclusivity

6. How would you describe the priority given to disability inclusion by AAU's leadership (e.g., in public statements, budgeting, or strategic plans)? Can you share an example where this priority or lack of priority directly impacted your experience?
7. Faculty and administrators play a key role in fostering inclusivity. How, in your view, does AAU's leadership ensure they are equipped to address the needs of students with disabilities? Where do gaps persist?
8. AAU has policies aimed at inclusivity how transparent and responsive do you feel leadership is in revising these policies based on feedback from students with disabilities?

Section D: Recommendations

9. If you could reallocate resources at AAU (funding, staff, or infrastructure) to improve inclusivity, what area would you prioritize and why? What tangible outcomes would you expect?

10. What specific process (e.g., advisory boards, mandatory student consultations) should AAU implement to ensure students with disabilities have ongoing influence over inclusivity decisions?

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Objective: To understand faculty and administrators' perceptions of leadership, inclusivity, and challenges in implementing inclusive policies.

Section A: Background Information

1. What is your role in the university, and how does it relate to service provision to students with Special needs?
2. Have you received any training on inclusive education or on how to better support of students with Special needs?

Section B: Institutional Inclusivity

3. How do you perceive the inclusivity efforts at AAU related to students with special needs?
4. What challenges do faculty members face when supporting students with special needs?
5. How do policies and institutional frameworks of Addis Ababa University support or hinder inclusivity of students with special needs?

Section C: Leadership's Role in Inclusivity

6. How would you describe the leadership style at AAU in terms of promoting inclusivity?
7. What leadership behaviors and practices at AAU have positively impacted inclusivity of students with special needs?
8. Are there any gaps in leadership strategies regarding students with special needs?

Section D: Recommendations

9. What steps can be taken to improve inclusive leadership at AAU specifically to support students with special needs?
10. What policy or institutional changes do you think will enhance inclusivity of students with special needs at AAU?

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